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C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000640

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/27/2019
TAGS: ECON PGOV PREL TS IT
SUBJECT: BERLUSCONI'S VISIT TO TUNISIA: OLD FRIENDS, NEW
BUSINESS

Classified By: CDA Marc Desjardins, E.O. 12958 reasons (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Tunisian President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi deepened their ties of friendship August 18 with a day-long personal visit. Berlusconi arrived mid-morning and stayed until late in the afternoon. The visit was so private in nature that neither the Italian or Tunisian MFA were involved or even fully aware of the details. According to the Italian Embassy Commercial Counselor, this latest meeting had been planned to take place at Berlusconi's estate in Sardinia, but instead was held at Ben Ali's Carthage residence. The two leaders ate lunch and held ""side conversations"" about business. Berlusconi later gave an interview on the Tunisian satellite TV channel Nessma (of which he is a part-owner) in which he discussed Italian-Maghreb cooperation and, according to local press reports, told jokes about President Obama and the Pope (NFI). In the interview, he also stated that he wanted to be remembered ""as the head of government who was able to defeat the Mafia.""

¶2. (C) Berlusconi was accompanied only by Tarak Ben Ammar, a long-time business associate and advisor. Ben Ammar, of Corsican-Tunisian parentage and a nephew of former President Bourguiba, partnered with Berlusconi in 1989 to form the Paris-based production and distribution company Quinta Communications. Berlusconi named Ben Ammar as advisor for Middle East and North Africa in 2001. Beyond his friendship with Ben Ali, Berlusconi's Tunisian interests include movie studios, distribution companies, and a 50% stake in Nessma TV which he shares with Tarak Ben Ammar.

¶3. (C) Press reports added that Ben Ali and Berlusconi used the occasion of the visit to sign an accord to produce energy in Tunisia and deliver it to Italy via a new 1,000 megawatt submarine cable. In fact, the energy accord was signed in July 2003 and gave way to a joint venture between the state-owned Societe Tunisienne d'Electricite et de Gaz (STEG) and the Italian utility TERNA. Tenders for the new power plant have not yet been released, but the project is expected to come on line by 2014. Italian companies are poised to compete for the tender to build the new power plant, and will compete to power the line with a mix of coal and wind power.

Please visit Embassy Tunis' Classified Website at:
[http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/tunis/index.c fm](http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/tunis/index.cfm)
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